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Adolf Hitler's Letter to the Editor

A Note on Hitler's Message to *The Nation*

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This paper is devoted to an analysis of an unusual document, a letter to the editor, signed by Adolf Hitler, which appeared in the September 2, 1925, issue of the American journal of opinion, *The Nation*. There is no other instance of an unsolicited communication from Hitler, and no reference to the letter in either original or secondary sources concerned with National Socialism has come to light.

The substance of the letter—essentially a rejoinder to an essay by Louis Fischer that had appeared in an earlier issue of *The Nation*—is unremarkable. But the questions raised by the existence of the document are intriguing, as Hitler had no ability to communicate in the English language, and little interest, during the period when the letter was written, in the United States.

The argument of the paper is that Ernst Hanfstaengl, the Harvard-educated confidante of Hitler, served as an intermediary in this affair, and thereby exposed Hitler to a perspective from the American left.

The career of Adolf Hitler, among its many effects, has produced a substantial international research effort. What is known of his childhood and adolescence, his political awakening in Vienna, his military service in World War I, his life as a revolutionary politician in the Weimar Republic, and, of course, his tenure as Führer of the Third Reich has been well documented. Proposed here is a notation on this large, disparate bibliography.

On September 2, 1925, the American journal of opinion, *The Nation*, published a letter to the editor signed by Adolf Hitler himself. While no reference to this singular document in either original or secondary sources concerned with National Socialism has come to light, the letter was discussed briefly by Louis Fischer in his autobiography, *Men and Politics* (1941).¹ This is altogether fitting, as Fischer helped to provide the stimulus for Hitler's letter in the first instance. In an essay in the June 3, 1925, number of *The Nation*, Fischer had argued that

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German courts were not dispensing justice with an even hand, that communists who had planned an insurrection were dealt with much more severely than Hitler and the other conspirators involved in the Munich *Putsch* of November 1923. Hitler, Fischer noted, spent “six months in a palace prison” as punishment for his attempt at a coup, but his communist counterparts got “ten or fifteen years’ hard labor.”² On September 2, *The Nation* printed a response from Hitler:³

To the Editor of *The Nation*:

Sir: In your issue of June 3 Mr. Louis Fischer says that “Hitler spent six months in a palace prison and was then released.”

I was in prison at Sandberg [*sic*] a. S. thirteen months in all. A special decree on April 1, 1924, deprived me of all previous privileges. All privileges theretofore granted the prisoner were either abridged or wiped out. Count Arco was still benefited by these alleviations.

Uffing, June 28

Adolf Hitler

The charges specified by Fischer and the character of Hitler’s response are, in themselves, unremarkable. But the issue raised by the existence of the letter is more interesting than its substance. Why, since Fischer’s comment on the *Putsch* and its judicial aftermath was but one of many, and since there is no other instance of a communication between Adolf Hitler and an American publication, did Hitler respond to this particular article? Obviously, no definitive answer is possible. But we do know enough about Hitler and his associates to permit conjecture.

Certainly Hitler was not preoccupied by a concern for his reputation in the United States, for he had little knowledge of, or interest in, American life and politics.⁴ It is true, as several of his biographers have noted, that he was entranced as a boy by Karl May’s romantic tales about American Indians, but the effect of these juvenile stories on his adult image of the United States is almost impossible to determine.⁵ It is evident, however, that the *Weltanschauung* that Hitler celebrated was misnamed, for his political universe did not extend beyond the European continent and England.⁶ His speeches in the period 1920-1925 were almost devoid of reference to the United States, and his first book, *Mein Kampf* (1925-1926), has only occasional and attenuated commentary. Since his lack of interest in the United States was accompanied by an inability to communicate in English, it would seem reasonable to conclude that he did not discover Fischer’s account in *The Nation* through his own initiative.

The fundamental questions with respect to Hitler’s letter would thus seem to be: Who read Fischer’s statement to him and composed or translated his rejoinder? Who, among Hitler’s entourage during this period, might have read an American liberal journal of opinion in the first instance?

Two figures among Hitler’s followers in 1925 could have served as intermediary: Kurt Ludecke and Ernst Hanfstaengl. Both knew English and had lived, worked, and traveled in the United States. Both professed that they had attempted to instruct Hitler about the United States.⁷

Ludecke was an early convert to National Socialism, offering himself in August 1922 to Hitler and his cause “without reservation.”⁸ An indistinct figure on the fringes of party politics subsequently, he served as a semiofficial fund raiser and general publicity agent for National Socialism in his periods of work and travel in

the United States. His great opportunity came, as he saw it, in February 1924, when he attempted—unsuccessfully—to solicit funds for the party from Henry Ford.⁹ But while this and other less ambitious fiscal forays in the United States failed, Ludecke evidently was regarded by Hitler as something of an expert on American mores and politics. Compton has reported, for example, that Hitler reiterated in the 1930's observations on American life and politics that Ludecke had presented to him some time before—that a struggle between the “two Americas,” one Protestant and Nordic, the other Jewish, Alpine, and Latin, was inevitable, although not imminent; that a failure of the New Deal might precipitate revolution in the United States; and that the United States was committed to a foreign policy of isolationism.¹⁰ However, Ludecke's argument that it was vital for Germany to garner the goodwill of the United States apparently made no enduring impression upon Hitler.

Hitler's early relationship with Hanfstaengl was pragmatic. While a dilettante in politics, the Harvard-educated Hanfstaengl was well connected in both the United States and Germany. He claims in his autobiography that he knew John Reed, T. S. Eliot, and Walter Lippmann, among others; that while at Harvard, he was a guest of Theodore Roosevelt; and that he had become friendly with New York State Senator Franklin Delano Roosevelt.¹¹ He introduced Hitler to elements of Munich's high society, and, in general, sought to make this revolutionary politician socially respectable.¹² But his importance to Hitler had a financial dimension as well, for Hanfstaengl, as the heir to his family's art print business, enjoyed a comfortable income. It was a gift tendered by Hanfstaengl which helped Hitler to finance the conversion of the party's newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, to a daily. Moreover, he was a pianist of some repute, and his thundering renditions of Hitler's favorite pieces served as entertainment and diversion for the Führer. Perhaps these factors help to explain why Hanfstaengl had easier and more continuous access to Hitler than Ludecke, and why Hitler put him in charge of relations with the foreign press after the National Socialists took power on January 30, 1933.

While either Ludecke or Hanfstaengl might have assisted Hitler with his communication, the evidence that is available points clearly to Hanfstaengl. Of primary importance is the fact that the return address inscribed on the letter is Uffing, a small town in Bavaria on the road to Garmisch-Partenkirchen, where Hanfstaengl had purchased a residence in 1923, and where Hitler was often a guest. Indeed, Hitler fled to Hanfstaengl's home after the *Putsch*, and was captured there two days later.¹³ Secondly, Hanfstaengl's English language skills were superior to Ludecke's, and the style of the letter suggests that its author or translator was reasonably fluent. Hanfstaengl's mother was American, and, presumably, he began to learn English as a child. He had also spent more time in the United States than Ludecke, for, in addition to his tenure at Harvard, he presided over the New York City branch of the family business from 1911 until July 1921, when he returned to Germany.¹⁴ Ludecke, on the other hand, indicates in his memoirs that his English was self-taught, and that he had visited the United States on only two brief occasions before 1925.¹⁵ Finally, it should be noted that it is possible that Ludecke was not in Germany in June 1925, when the letter to *The Nation* was written. He states in his autobiography that he left Germany in 1925—sometime in the late spring or early summer, it would appear—for Montreal and the United

States.¹⁶

What evidence we have, therefore, suggests that Hanfstaengl brought Fischer's account in *The Nation* to Hitler's attention and helped him to prepare his response. Hanfstaengl's apparent role in this affair tends to support his claim, reiterated throughout his self-serving autobiography, that he attempted to educate Hitler about life and politics in the United States.¹⁷ Obviously, the content of the letter does not suggest hitherto unknown considerations, ideas that the "translator" was attempting to get Hitler to advance. Obviously, there is little in subsequent developments to suggest that his efforts swayed Hitler in any respect. But Hitler's unique letter does establish that he was exposed to an American liberal's perspective on his movement. The fact that Hitler felt moved to reply to Fischer at all is an indication that the perspective made an impression upon him.

NOTES

¹Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics*, New York, 1941, pp. 100-101.

²Louis Fischer, "Class Justice in Germany," *The Nation*, June 3, 1925, p. 624.

³Fischer noted that "*The Nation* printed his [Hitler's] letter and threw the original in the wastebasket" (*Men and Politics*, p. 101). There is no reference to a copy of the document in the guides to captured German records prepared by the American Historical Association and the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace. As for the misspelling of Landsberg prison, one must assume that Hitler could spell the name of the institution in which he was incarcerated. The responsibility for the error in the text must lie elsewhere. Count Anton Arco-Valley had assassinated Kurt Eisner in February 1919. In 1920, Arco was tried and condemned to death, but his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. He was released after four years and died in an automobile accident in 1945. See Allan Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria, 1918-1919*, Princeton, 1965, pp. 271-272.

⁴Gerhard Weinberg, "Hitler's Image of the United States," *The American Historical Review*, July 1964, p. 1007; Erich Matthias, "The Western Powers in Hitler's World of Ideas," in Anthony Nicholls and Erich Matthias, editors, *German Democracy and the Triumph of Hitler*, New York, 1971, pp. 170-172; James Compton, *The Swastika and the Eagle*, New York, 1967, pp. 7-10.

⁵Weinberg, *loc. cit.* Hitler did observe in his *Table Talk*, however, that May "opened my eyes on the world," while Otto Dietrich, according to Nolte, reported that Hitler reread all of these juvenile adventure stories during 1933 and 1934. See Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, New York, 1965, p. 290; and Hitler's *Secret Conversations, 1941-1944*, New York, 1953, p. 257.

⁶On this point, see Gerhard Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, New York, 1970, Chapter 1; Matthias, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-174.

⁷Accounts of Hitler's relationships with Ludecke and Hanfstaengl will be found in Weinberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-12; Compton, *loc. cit.*

⁸Kurt Ludecke, *I Knew Hitler*, New York, 1937, p. 16.

⁹Ford had seemed to Ludecke to be an especially good prospect for a donation. He had assumed that Ford's anti-Semitism, as expressed in a notorious anti-Jewish campaign in the Ford newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, would make him a natural ally of Hitler (Ludecke, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-201). An account of the anti-Semitic campaign and its consequences is given in Allan Nevins and Frank Hill,

Ford, New York, 1957, pp. 311-322.

¹⁰Compton, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9. Ludecke summarizes his views in *op. cit.*, pp. 321-325, 452-453 of his autobiography.

¹¹Ernst Hanfstaengl, *Hitler*, London, 1957, pp. 26-27. Hanfstaengl was a prodigious name dropper. See, for example, his comments on pp. 24, 28 in this work.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 39-40; Bullock, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.

¹³Hitler's escape from Munich and capture in Uffing are described in Harold Gordon, *Hitler and the Beer Hall Putsch*, Princeton, 1972, pp. 464-467. Cf. Hanfstaengl, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 27-29.

¹⁵Ludecke, *op. cit.*, pp. 37, 191-223.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 286-291.

¹⁷Hanfstaengl, *op. cit.*, pp. 41, 52, 64, 74, 121, 124, 135.